

AN INTERVIEW WITH
HELEN KELLER

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AMERICAN FOUNDATION
FOR THE BLIND INC.

An Interview With Helen Keller

By RUTH CAMPBELL

Helen Keller thinks the Tennessee program for Services for the Blind is growing with amazing speed, and that it represents one of the most far-reaching and far-seeing State programs now being builded.

Miss Keller, through her perfect medium of interpretation, Polly Thompson, talked at some length about our comprehensive program for the Blind. It will be remembered that Miss Keller appeared before the Tennessee Legislature of 1943 to introduce the bill that created the Division of Services for the Blind in the Tennessee Department of Public Welfare.

Therefore, as she said, she felt that the program was, as a measure, her baby, and naturally she is watching its growth with keenest interest and enthusiasm. She was especially delighted with the very new program for Home Teaching, and with the philosophy characteristic of her, tied that little package up with a ribbon when she said, "Where would I have been without home teaching."

It is not only our program for the sightless that brings praise from Miss Keller but it is also the program to prevent blindness with adequate and intelligent and timely medical treatment. "I like to tell about Tennessee," she says. "When I am talking with officials in other States I do not fail to mention Tennessee's awakening to its responsibilities to the Blind and I watch for reports, news items and articles that assure me of the continued rapid growth of its program. It is not only the Blind who are being helped," she continued, "but all exceptional children are coming under thoughtful supervision. The

State-Wide Institutes for the Care and Education of the Exceptional Child which will be held in June emphasize Tennessee's determination to care for its children."

Miss Keller admitted that for the time being her interests were turned to hospitalized soldiers. "They are so brave," she said, "so merry and uncomplaining in spite of their wounds, and I feel that we should not relax our efforts to help them in every way possible."

To spend two hours with Helen Keller is more than an education in philosophy, it is in the nature of a blessing. I was fortunate in being permitted to meet her at Thayer General Hospital where she spent two days in early June meeting the soldiers hospitalized there, the staff, and officials of the Red Cross.

I saw her first coming on the platform hand in hand with that amazing Polly Thompson; two very handsome women with a harmony of understanding and an accord of thought that made words between them scarcely necessary. You realize how instantaneous and complete is their exchange of thought as you see Miss Thompson tap a lightning-like message into those sensitive hands of Miss Keller's.

Miss Thompson took over the preliminaries of their appearance with Miss Keller's delicate fingers touching her lips and throat only occasionally, she explained the childhood illness that left Helen blind and deaf and mute and then she told about the early teaching of that genius, Miss Sullivan. She told how on the first day that Helen realized things could be identified by words she went wild with joy and before night fell had learned the names of forty familiar

objects. As Miss Thompson went on with the story of Helen's education you could see the soldiers leaning forward, hanging on every word. There was the incredible story of the examinations for Radcliff College, the college career and the learning of languages, and here Miss Keller interrupted to say that she was the world's worst student of Spanish but that she did love ancient Greek—a casual remark that left her listeners gasping.

Miss Thompson told how Helen learned to speak, and then came the drama of a lecture by a woman blind, deaf and mute, and while there was some interpretation by Miss Thompson, Miss Keller gave her audience a talk such as only a scholar could give, and one rich with understanding and inspiration. It was so smoothly done that the brief delay of interpretation in no way punctuated the easy flow of Miss Keller's ideas.

Before giving her address, Miss Keller illustrated how she had learned the tones of speaking, the fingers on the throat, lips and nose and then she spoke slowly to illustrate voice placement. She followed that with a demonstration of musical appreciation, beating time to a Liszt composition. When the pianist broke into jazz, she put her hand over her face and laughed and later said that she liked jazz, as it was the laughter of music, howbeit the laughter with the tongue in the cheek.

Miss Keller first addressed the doctors whom she called co-partners with God in their rebuilding of the bodies that housed the unconquerable souls of the American soldiers. She spoke especially to the nurses and then to the soldiers. What she said need not be written here, but if you could have seen those hundreds of men with tears running down their cheeks you would un-

derstand what is meant by the blessing of contact with Helen Keller.

In her long trek through the wards Miss Keller was even more amazing. A few swift touches from Miss Thompson's fingers and she would say to a soldier, "You have auburn hair and it is naturally curly, you bad boy! Such hair belongs to the poor women who have to sit under driers." She seemed to know all the cities where various men had lived and her quick response was an alchemy that brought immediate closeness. She would say, "From Chicago? I know your windy city. I get cross with the winter climate but I return to it because Chicago calls one back." Or, "Pittsburgh? The smoke is dense but not the people!" She mentioned streets in Denver and a soldier said he lived on one of them and seemed suddenly not so depressed. She laughed with another over the heat of New Orleans and when she had left him he grinned at me and patted a cast that covered leg and hip. "I guess I'm not so bad off at that," he said.

From six-thirty in the morning to seven at night she spent her two days with these wounded men and then was terribly unhappy because she had had to miss one ward. Where she gets that amazing vitality one cannot know unless it stems from her love of humanity and her magnificent overcoming of a triple handicap.

It is indeed something to excite unbounded admiration and pride in the hearts of Americans that a Countrywoman, blind, deaf and mute, should have risen to such fame that she is known the length and breadth of the land. The porters on the train know her, Presidents receive her in the White House. The King of England motored to her little cottage in Scotland to have

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tea in her garden. Blind and handicapped children hold to her story as they would to a torch that lights their way, and thousands of persons have been carried through the Slough of Despond with her to guide them—this Helen Keller who would not acknowledge defeat.

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